

How Charlie Kirk went from college dropout to Trump influencer

-Mara Richards Bim, Baptist News Global | September 10, 2025

It seems Charlie Kirk — the Millennial founder of the Christian nationalist powerhouse Turning Point USA — is everywhere these days.

He was part of a handful of Trump insiders tasked last fall with [administering loyalty tests](#) to prospective hires for senior posts at the Pentagon and within the intelligence agencies.

More recently, Kirk, now 31, was one of a number of [loyalists](#) President Trump appointed to the boards of the military academies in the United States. Kirk was appointed to the Air Force Academy's [Board of Visitors](#) charged with inquiring into, among other things, the academy's curriculum and instruction.

Kirk's appointment is especially ironic. It was his [rejection](#) from West Point Military Academy as a graduating senior in 2012 from Wheeling High School outside of Chicago that sent him on a downward spiral and into the arms of the burgeoning right-wing extremist movement which he now sits at the top of.

The beginnings of Charlie Kirk

In her book *Raising Them Right: The Untold Story of America's Ultraconservative Youth Movement and its Plot for Power*, journalist Kyle Spencer sums up Kirk's trajectory within the politics of resentment: "His metamorphosis can be seen as a case study of the power of grievance politics and a reminder that resentment is an energizing fuel most potent when delivered by leaders who have felt it deeply themselves."



Charlie Kirk as a high school senior

Kirk's father was an architect with his own firm. He designed and built middle-class luxury estates while Kirk's mother traded at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (she later went back to school to become a licensed therapist). Undoubtedly the 2008 housing crisis and the resulting bank bailouts impacted the Kirks' businesses and was fodder for dinner table conversation in their five-bedroom mansion.

Kirk's resentment was in full-bloom a few months later at the start of his freshman year under the new Obama presidency. Obama's career began in the same Chicago suburb where Kirk attended high school. While the first African American president's political win was celebrated by most in the rapidly diversifying suburb, it was not celebrated by Kirk.

Whether it was Obama's continuance of George W. Bush's bank bailouts or his skin color, Kirk was not a fan. In response, he began building a contrarian political persona around his freshman interpretation of Reagan economics, the work of the economist Milton Friedman and gun rights.

Kirk's classmates described him as "rude," "arrogant" and as someone with "a superiority complex." He called teachers with whom he disagreed "neo-Marxists" and often was belligerent in class. On the topic of gun rights, Spencer [writes](#) that Kirk "once asked a teacher if guns make people violent, 'do forks make people fat?'"

By the time Kirk entered his senior year, the Tea Party was on the rise. Stanford sociologist Robb Willer conducted a [study](#) in 2016 that showed the rise of the Tea Party was directly linked

to “the relative ‘racial standing’ of whites in the United States” with the election of Obama and the economic trends around 2008.

As a high school senior, Kirk began going to meetings and hanging out with right-wing political activists like 71-year old [Bill Montgomery](#) who, months later, would help Kirk co-found Turning Point USA. Also during his senior year, Kirk wrote an [opinion piece](#) for the [controversial misinformation](#) site Breitbart News, which landed him an interview on Fox News.

As he headed toward graduation, Kirk was denied entry into West Point — one of the most selective universities in America, with an [acceptance rate](#) of 12%.

Kirk, however, [claimed](#) his rejection was because he was passed over for “a far less-qualified candidate of a different gender and a different persuasion.”

Montgomery convinced him to take a gap year and work the political circuit. Using money he received for his high school graduation, Kirk launched TPUSA with Montgomery. He was 18 years old.

Kirk briefly attended [Harper College](#), a community college near Chicago, but dropped out and never completed a degree.

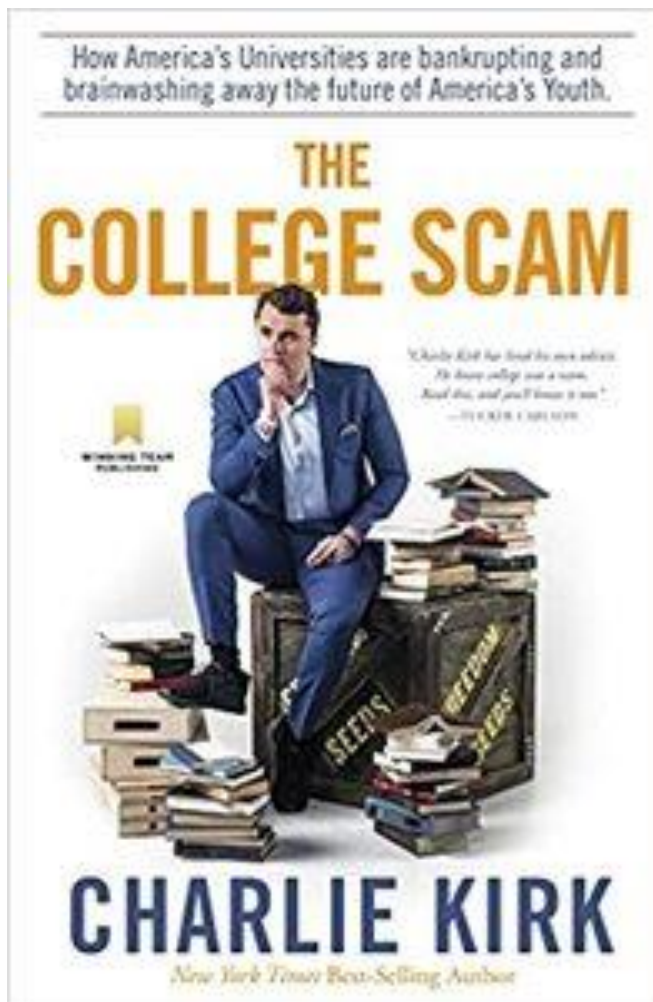
Politics of resentment

In the fall of 2012 — just months after graduating high school — Kirk and TPUSA began by [sponsoring debates](#) between Democratic and Republican students on a handful of college campuses in the Midwest. He also attended the Republican National Convention, where a chance meeting with multimillionaire investor Foster Freiss in a stairwell led to an infusion of cash into TPUSA.

After Obama won a second term in fall 2012, Kirk and TPUSA became integral to the infighting within the Republican Party. Kirk spent the next three years touring the country to speak at a variety of Republican — and primarily Tea Party — events. The Tea Party — having seen Republicans lose again in the 2012 presidential election — was livid and organizing. The target of their vitriol was the Affordable Care Act (which they dubbed “Obamacare”) and they were mobilizing to take over the Republican Party.

It was in these Tea Party meeting rooms that Kirk — a teenage, angry white male — learned to work a room and engage with political donors.

One such event was in June 2013 with then-Congressman Steve Daines (now senator), Montana’s then-Attorney General Tim Fox (who left office in [disgrace](#) after signing onto a lawsuit challenging the 2020 election results) and former Montana Sen. Ryan Zinke (who later served as Trump’s first secretary of the interior and is now a representative for Montana).



Quoted afterward in [The Montana Standard](#), Kirk said he started TPUSA and was hanging out with right-wing Tea Party activists specifically because he was frustrated with the “too bureaucratic” Young Republicans who were unwilling to try new approaches to organizing.

By the time Donald J. Trump came onto the scene, Kirk had secured a spot within the remade Republican Party. More important, after marinating in resentment politics for several years, Kirk was a true believer.

Much has been written about Trump’s success at tapping into this grievance culture. Kirk, like many young white men who did not attend college, relished Trump’s offensive behavior and rhetoric. They felt “seen” again. And they began acting out and amplifying the behavior of their new leader.

[Charlie Kirk, Donald Trump and neo-Nazis](#)

On June 16, 2015, Trump made his [infamous descent](#) down the escalator at Trump Tower in New York City to officially launch his 2016 campaign. His inaugural speech was filled with the

kind of [racist rhetoric](#) he had become known for after five years of [falsely](#) saying Barack Obama was not born in America.

The next day, a 21-year old white supremacist neo-Nazi attended a Bible study at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. At the end of the study, he stood up and [opened fire](#) on the 10 African American church members who had opened their community to him — killing nine of them, including the senior pastor, state senator Clementa C. Pinckney.

These events — Trump’s racist campaign, the mass shooting at a historic African American church and the platforming of a young, angry white Charlie Kirk — are in many ways the starting point for where we are in today’s political landscape filled with conspiracy theories and the rise of Christian nationalism.

Weeks after the Mother Emanuel shootings, Kirk joined the Trump campaign, where he became friends with the future president’s son, Donald Trump Jr. He also launched Turning Point Action Inc., a 501(c)(4) tied to his nonprofit TPUSA. The new nonprofit strategically placed him within the [web of dark money](#) that [continues](#) to this day.



Charlie Kirk with Jerry Falwell Jr. in a publicity photo for the Falkirk Center at Liberty University. The name was a mash up for Falwell and Kirk.

After Trump’s surprise victory in 2016, Kirk and TPUSA upped the ante on their provocative antics by publishing a “[Professor Watchlist](#).” The list targeted college professors who [Kirk accused](#) (without evidence) of promoting undefined “leftist propaganda.”

Individuals from across the political spectrum decried the move and called it a “[witch hunt](#)” and [reminiscent](#) of Sen. Joseph McCarthy’s [political persecution](#) of anyone he thought might be a communist.

This list was just TPUSA’s opening salvo in an escalating war on college campuses; but the war on college campuses wasn’t the only war raging in the early days of the Trump presidency. In the aftermath of the Mother Emanuel mass shooting and anti-Black hate crime, calls echoed across the South to once and for all [remove the monuments](#) erected to memorialize the Confederacy from the Civil War.

These [monuments](#) — raised up during and after the height of Jim Crow laws — continued to feed the [Lost Cause](#) narrative embraced by white supremacists. That [myth](#) — that the heroic Confederacy rose up to justly fight the Civil War as an act of liberty rather than over slavery — has influenced every facet of life in the South since it was first deployed in 1866.

In the first year of Trump’s presidency, fueled in no small part by the president’s continued racist rhetoric, battles over Confederate monuments reached a fevered pitch.

On Aug. 11, 2017, after weeks of [publicizing](#) it, white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups descended on the streets of [Charlottesville, Va.](#), under the [pretense](#) of protesting the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee. Angry white men marched through the streets carrying tiki torches and shouting slogans like “Jews will not replace us.”

While young, angry white supremacist neo-Nazis were taking to the streets in cities like Charlottesville, they were beginning to take note of Kirk and TPUSA.

After releasing the “Professor Watchlist,” Kirk and TPUSA began [booking appearances](#) with alt-right neo-Nazis like Milo Yiannopoulos. These campus appearances led to massive (and [sometimes violent](#)) protests on college campuses.

After Charlottesville, white supremacists and neo-Nazis flocked to TPUSA events on college campuses and elsewhere, looking to fight with counter protesters. Kirk did [nothing](#) to separate himself or TPUSA from them.

“After Charlottesville, white supremacists and neo-Nazis flocked to TPUSA events on college campuses.”

In fact, many of TPUSA’s field organizers embraced the white supremacists in their midst. So much so that the media started taking note. Rather than distancing itself from racists and neo-Nazis, Kirk and TPUSA began offering “new and former staff with complimentary [social media background checks](#)” to uncover past racist behavior “that could potentially damage your credibility or the credibility of the organization.”

TPUSA had become a powerhouse in national politics and Kirk didn’t want to see the organization brought down by inconvenient ties to racism.

For example, during the 2018 midterms, Turning Point Action Inc. and TPUSA both engaged the marketing firm Rally Forge to place ads from a fake liberal organization and to create a troll farm on Facebook to [promote Republican candidates](#). From July 2018 to June 2019, the two organizations paid Rally Forge nearly \$1 million for the ads.



Charlie Kirk speaks to a gathering sponsored by the Conservative Baptist Network during the SBC annual meeting.

Kirk embraces Christian nationalism

In the years between Trump’s 2020 election defeat and his 2024 campaign, Kirk found himself at odds with neo-Nazi groups. To their mind, TPUSA wasn’t [racist enough](#). That didn’t keep Kirk or TPUSA from [schmoozing with them](#) at events like the Conservative Political Action Conference. Nevertheless, Kirk and TPUSA sought to distance themselves publicly from neo-Nazism. As they did, they moved toward a full-throated embrace of [Christian nationalism](#).

Recently, there have been several [articles](#) noting the [evolution](#) of Kirk and TPUSA from an organization devoted to promoting free market capitalism to one focused on promoting Christian nationalism.

In 2018, during an [interview](#) titled “Defending Christianity and Discussing Radical Islam,” Kirk told conservative commentator Dave Rubin Christians should respect the separation of church and state. But in 2022, Kirk — in his own podcast — [declared](#): “There is no separation of church and state. It’s a fabrication. It’s a fiction. It’s not in the Constitution. It’s made up by secular

humanists. It's derived from a single letter that Thomas Jefferson wrote to the Danbury Baptist Convention."

This assertion is a nearly word-for-word talking point from the controversial pseudo-historian [David Barton](#).



An attendee shows off his copy of Right Wing Revolution by Charlie Kirk at The People's Convention hosted by Turning Point USA in Detroit on June 14, 2024. (Photo by Adam J. Dewey/NurPhoto via AP)

On TPUSA's 2021 tax filing, TPUSA [redefined its mission](#) for the first time since its founding. Now, just months after the January 6 attempted insurrection, TPUSA was no longer focused on "fiscal responsibility, free markets and capitalism through non-partisan debate, dialogue and discussion." Instead, TPUSA identified its mission as:

To empower informed civic and cultural engagement grounded in American Exceptionalism and a positive spirit of action. Turning Point USA guides citizens through development of knowledge, skills, values and motivation, so they can meaningfully engage in their communities to restore traditional American values like patriotism, respect for life, liberty, family and fiscal responsibility.

The 2021 tax filing also is the first one in which TPUSA listed as one of its programs "TPUSA Faith." TPUSA received a \$50,000 gift in the early part of 2022 from [It Takes a Family Foundation](#) — a right-wing, NAR-supporting family foundation that also funds the extremist groups Family Research Council, Project Veritas, Judicial Watch, Sean Feucht's Let Us Worship and Barton's Wallbuilders, among others.

In fact, it seems the family members behind It Takes a Family Foundation are the connection between Kirk's TPUSA, Sean Feucht's ministry and NAR frontman Lance Wallnau. Together, these three men created "[The Courage Tour](#)," which spanned the U.S. in the leadup to the 2024

election. Part old-school revival, part campaign rally, the tour was an openly Christian nationalist crusade to elect Donald Trump.

TPUSA has not yet submitted its tax filing for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2024, but according to the tax filing from the [year before](#) (ending nearly 18 months before the election), TPUSA Faith had become its own line item in the organization.

In that tax filing, TPUSA describes TPUSA Faith's mission as:

A movement to push back against secular totalitarianism in America, eradicate wokeism from the church, inspire the rise of strong churches, and wake up believers to their biblical responsibility to fight for freedom. TPUSA Faith equips Christians across the nation with the biblical, historical and constitutional knowledge they need to take a bold stand for liberty and God's kingdom through TPUSA Faith courses, regional pastor roundtables, National Pastor's Summits and Freedom Night in America events.

Expenses for TPUSA Faith ending June 30, 2023, totaled more than \$13 million and the organization "coordinated" with 2,400 churches and 6,000 pastors attended its summits and roundtables targeting them.



There is an excellent new six-part documentary podcast called "[When the Wolves Came](#)" that tracks how TPUSA Faith helped import Christian nationalism into churches on a massive scale.

TPUSA Faith has intertwined an extreme version of Christianity with the populist grievance-driven nationalist movement. Those who attend cannot differentiate between which elements of

the TPUSA Faith events are worship service and which are political rally. The music, the lighting, the “sermons” and the calls to spiritual warfare on behalf of Trump bleed into calls to mobilize voters. And most of the events take place within the walls of actual churches, further blurring the boundary between what is Christianity and what is political extremism.

And that’s the point.

Charlie Kirk’s transformation is complete. He has gone from an angry white teenager being radicalized at racist Tea Party meetings to head of the most prolific organization radicalizing an entire generation of young people to the idolatry of Christian nationalism.

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